



**a heart
like mine**

a love story

A Heart Like Mine - a love story by theloversclub

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Summary: "Eds is still an insufferable hypochondriac paranoiac anxiety-riddled babbling baby-faced bastard with no social skills. And I'm in love with him, I guess. I guess that's what this is all about; I guess that's why you're reading this. It's because of Eds. That's all it's ever about." [title inspo; lyric from Melanie Martinez's 'High School Sweetheart']

1. Chapter 1

hey, im adam, pls enjoy my cute lil fic - follow my twitter reddieornxt to see me being trash

Senior *fucking* Year.

The weight of it keeps cycling round in my skull. See, I have no problem fucking around as much as possible. It's kind of my *thing*. On my latest school report, Ms Bedge said it; she said 'If there was a class for messing around, Tozier would ace it.' Well, there's no such class, apparently, and apparently this year is too important for me to keep that shit up. So I'm wearing my best serious face, and my serious outfit (which consists of black skinny jeans, a white tee and a navy over-shirt with a swirly white line pattern), and serious attitude ... for about thirty seconds. Or, more specifically, however long it takes for Eddie to find me in the corridor today.

"Rich!" He calls from behind me as he grabs my shoulder and walks with me. "How're you feeling; first day of the big S-Y." He spells it out like some huge corporation or shiny neon sign. I laugh and shrug him off.

"Its just another day in hell, Eds." I breeze through the sentence and for a second I think I sound convincing. "Nothing special about it." His face scrunches up and flushes.

"Stop calling me that Rich." Its been years now, but his voice really sounds like he thinks I can be convinced. I can't, by the way. He's always gonna be Eds to me. "And you can tell me you don't care, but your shirt is brand fucking new and you brushed your hair." *Shit*. He's not wrong. "I like the shirt, by the way." I shove him knowingly.

"The new look's for the ladies, Eds, you wouldn't understand." I run a dramatic hand through my hair and purr a little, with a smirk.

Puberty handed me a decent card, I can't lie. My pudgy kid face got a little structure as I got taller, peaking at healthy 5'11" (6 foot on a good day, I swear.) And my hair's long, and dark, but less curly and

wavy and fucking weird than it used to be. I like it more; it looks cooler, I think. Body-wise, I don't have a six pack or anything crazy, but I look fine, and I'm packing a hefty amount too. Eddie got taller too, but not as tall as me, which I love to remind him. He's still got his face though, no changes there. Flush cheeks, big eyes, the works.

"I'm not sure about attracting ladies Rich, but you'll definitely attract flies." He stops at our lockers and swirls in his combo mindlessly. "You hear about Bill and his summer fling?"

"Polly?" Red hair. Dainty. Bad ass. He has a type. "No, what happened?"

"Dumped him." He's sorting through textbooks carefully; his twitches and tendencies are strong as ever. "She said he was 'too much, too quick'."

"Ah, sucks." I chuckle as I start to organise my shit too. "Always knew he'd have an issue with being too quick."

"Not like that." The way Eddie cringes is golden. "Gross. No, he was all 'I'm in love with you, here's a whole art collection inspired by your eyes', and she was all 'I just wanna sit behind the Movie Theatre and make out', and..."

"What we talking about?" A smooth and simple voice chirped from behind us. *Bill*.

"Nothing." Eddie and I say in synchronicity, before slamming our lockers closed.

Our friendship group was interesting to say the least. Bev moved after *that* summer, and we see her sometimes at holidays. I don't mind her absence too much; certainly not as much as Bill minds, since whenever she leaves again it's all he talks about for months. Mike moved too, about a year ago, to some place on the East Coast, which sucked. But Eds, Bill, Ben, Stan and I were still thick as thieves; still losers, just the way we'd always been. Bill's a serial dater, because he falls in love too quick with any cute girl that makes eye contact. Stan's a mega-dork, but he has friends in the AV Club now so he seems settled into his geekdom. Ben has lost a decent

amount of the weight now, and he single handedly established Derry High's Poetry Club, of which he is one of only three regular attendees. And Eds and I haven't changed our tune one bit; we're still inseparable, even though he's an insufferable hypochondriac paranoiac anxiety-riddled babbling baby-faced bastard with no social skills. And I'm in love with him, I guess. I guess that's what this is all about; I guess that's why you're reading this. It's because of Eds. That's all it's ever about.

I'm not fucking gay, so I want that clear right from the fucking start. I don't even *like* boys; I just *like* Eds. And yes, I exaggerate how much I want to get with girls, but I figure I'm only not interested in girls right now because I'm too busy being caught up in my crush on Eddie, and as soon as I'm over him, I'll go right back to fantasising about anything that has tits (apart from Ben, that is.)

Ahem. May I present to you; *Richie Tozier's Big Goals for Senior Year*:

[] Get over your dorky, stupid best friend.

[] Bang the hottest babe in the grade.

[] Scrape through finals.

[] Overthrow prom.

[] Get. The. Fuck. Outta. Derry.

They're simple goals, and they're all oh-so in sight. The prom thing is a matter of principle; I hate prom, and the purpose of prom, and the chaos of prom, so I want to ruin ours. Also, I want to do it because it would be a pretty fucking legendary send-off for a pretty fucking legendary legend. So this year, as with every year since the fucking clown nonsense, it's Richie Tozier and the Losers Club ft. Eddie Kaspbrak against the world.

The bell rings. Here we fucking go.

2. Chapter 2

Let the record show; Richie Tozier got a detention on his first day back at school. That's right ladies and gentleman; I am so incapable of paying any fraction of attention to a teacher that I got a *detention* for *humming* to myself. I wasn't even humming loud, but apparently the way I ignored Mr Walton telling me to stop *three times* demonstrated a 'complete lack of respect or drive'. So, its 3pm and almost time to head to detention. But I have a plan.

"Rich, it sounds like you kinda deserved it." Eds laughs as I explain my predicament to him in dramatic detail.

"It *sounds* like Mr Walton should try being less fucking boring." I groan, as I throw all my stuff back into my locker and slam it with a fist. That's when I had the idea. "How was calc?" I ask Eds, only half interested, to get him going while I meddle.

"Fine." He shrugged. "I swear, some of the neanderthals in that class with me can't wrap their head around basic algebra, even after all this time studying it." I take a small package out of my locker. "But I mainly mind my own business and get on with it in those lessons..." he continues, as I lean down and pretend to tie my shoe. "The new teacher is pretty loud, and nasally, and sounds like they might have a - a deviated septum, they should really get that checked out, but its not my place to..." As I stand up, I check the corridor and see a teacher walking towards us, just on cue. I take a pencil from my back pocket and drop it just in front of Eds.

"Ah shit, could you grab that?" He's still going on about nostrils.

"Huh?" He snaps back into the corridor with me. "Oh. Yeah, of course." He takes one step forward to pick up the pencil and, in doing so, kicks the bag of marbles I'd placed carefully in front of his feet. The marbles scatter across the floor and in the path of Miss Fedgwick, a severe looking woman with a hunchback, who stumbles slightly, before turning to Eddie sternly.

"Eddie Kaspbrak." She turns to me. "Tozier, are you in detention today?" I nod simply. "Well, Kaspbrak, I recommend you clean up this

mess and join him. You're in senior year now, boys. I really do expect better." She sighs, mutters a little, and wanders away shaking her head. Eds turns to me with a face like thunder.

"You selfish dick." He growls.

"I just didn't want detention taking away from time with my best friend!" I put on my best face of innocence and look at him with big eyes.

"Bullshit! You just always want a co-conspirator to go down with you." And he's right, of course, because he's always right about me. If Richie Tozier's going down, he's taking the closest person down with him.

Detention at Derry High is a depressing affair. It's a big classroom with a low ceiling a dim lighting that only works 70% of the time. Whichever teacher pulled the short straw for the day sits at the front, 'supervising', behind a desk while we all pretend to do homework but actually flick things, write notes, eat secretly from our bags and mime sexual gestures at one another with startling inaccuracy. It's an hour, and it's torturous. But, right now, its Eds and I playing a game of Tic-Tac-Toe on a note we're passing between one another and, honestly, there are worse things.

Eds wins with Xs so, for my final play, I connect all my Os to make a huge dick, and I slide the note back to him. He takes one look, grimaces, and crumples it up, giving me a disapproving glare. I love hate when he blushes like this. It's totally nothing like strawberry fields and scarlet skies that keep me up at night with their landscapes. It's beautiful fucking stupid. I chuckle to myself for my joke quickly, and avert eye contact, doodling on my notepad as the minutes continue to tick by. First I draw a little clown, broken into jigsaw pieces, frowning. It makes me smile; *fuck* clowns. Then I draw a little me with a crown, because I am in fact king of fucking everything. And then I draw Eddie. Just Eddie, plain and simple, no embellishments. I fold up the paper and quickly tuck it away.

Sometimes, when I fixate on something like his fucking blushing, I get in these little dazes. People say it's like butterflies in your

stomach but, really, that's a terrible description. It's actually more like snakes, all tangled up, slithering around each-other. This metaphor works better too because, when you get all choked up, it feels like a snake has made its way up to your throat, and it's trying to make its great escape, so you can't talk or breathe and you feel like you might throw up or, worse, say what you feel, so you swallow and you choke it back until the feeling subsides. And the dazes make my head feel funny too, and suddenly everything sounds like it's rooms away, *apart* from Eddie's voice, which feels so loud when it cuts through the white noise and holds me in its warmth.

"Richie!" He cuts through. "Detention's over man, let's get the hell outta here." I shake myself a little, and nod.

"My mother's gonna have a fucking aneurysm because I'm so late home, right?" Eddie has complained non-stop since leaving school. "When my mom literally fucking dies, Rich, that's on you."

"When your mom finally dies, Eds, it'll be because of all those whacky meds she's taking, and it'll have nothing to do with me." I shrug smugly as we turn the corner to his street.

"She *needs* the meds." When Eds says this, I can hear he's not convinced.

"Your meds weren't real, Eds, remember?" I know he does. "So hers probably aren't either. It's just logic."

"Whatever." He sighs, as we stop at the foot of his driveway. "Rich?" His voice is a little serious now. In his eyes, I see the storm clouds that usually precede his little tantrum panic attacks about nothing in particular - I have taken to calling these Kaspbr-attacks.

"Yeah, Eds." I try match his tone. It's part of 'empathy', apparently.

"Aren't you worried *at all* about senior year?" I blink back at him.

"Why would I be?"

"I don't know." There are words tangled up in his throat now, I can see it in his eyes. "I just... we will be friends still, right? After high

school." The concern in his eyes is adorable, and of course makes absolute mush of my insides, but I shove that shit away swiftly. I smile sincerely, and mask it with a laugh.

"Of course we will, dickwad." I grin. "We both know you can't live without me." He laughs a little, so I know whatever stupid thing I said fixed his little Kaspbr-attack. "See you tomorrow, Eds." When I turn to leave, there's a tug at my heart.

"Rich?" I turn back. "Can we hug?" I'm dumbfounded.

"Gay." I jeer.

"Fuck you." He jeers back. And we hug, naturally, because we were never not going to. And I hold him tight, so tight that it might seem that I feared he'd float away. But he never will, you see. Not on my watch.

3. Chapter 3

CW; homophobic slur and sexual content in the first section.

"Rich?" I turn back. "Can we hug?"

The lights are off in my room, and the door's closed, and I'm alone in the loneliest way. I let my hands get busy doing what they do best.

"We will be friends still, right? After high school." The concern in his eyes is adorable.

His fucking voice. His fucking face. I like every fucking part of him. And I can't stop thinking about him. And when I'm alone, and I get to thinking, I get to doing the things that I could never repeat out land. My hands continue.

I hold him tight, so tight.

And just like that - *holding him, so tight* - I finish. And the shame joins me in the room, the same way it always does. The fucking disgusting shame staring at me, in my state, in my bed. It's like an ugly shifting shadow looming at the foot of the mattress, and it knows every disgusting thing I've ever done or will ever do. And its whispering, only half to itself; 'Trash-mouth Tozier. Fag.' It sounds like a diagnosis of some terrible sickness. And I do feel sick.

Whenever I wind up hanging out with just Bill its either the best time ever or a complete bust. Jury's still out on how this specific encounter's gonna go, but we're walking to school together, because he went on one of his 'early morning headspace walks' and wound up in my neighbourhood. I don't mind Bill's idiosyncrasies too much. Sure, he's over-emotional and a little weird, but I'm hardly the poster child for functioning like a normal person, so I can't complain. Plus, Bill and I have been really close ever since Georgie went missing all that time ago, and shit like that doesn't wear off. I'm thankful for Bill in a lot of ways. In fact, in a couple minutes, I'm gonna feel that more than ever.

"I just miss her, you kn-know?" Bill's stutter was all-but-gone, except for when he talked about whichever girl he liked at any given moment.

"Prissy?" I'm fucking with him.

"Polly." He didn't catch the joke; he corrects me simply. "I really thought she might be *it* you know, like, *the it*."

"*The it*?" I laugh in response, because Bill never really knows how to express himself. "The *one*?"

"Y-yeah, the one." He smiles. When Bill talks about Polly, or Prissy, or Pamela, or Patricia, or whoever it is this time, he's in this bubble, and I recognise the look in his eyes. Because in his eyes, I can see the same haze that clouds my vision when I think about Eds for a little too long. And that's why I can never *really* tease Bill about his romances. Because, short-lived and quick as they are, I know they're real *to him*. I can see it in his eyes.

"You win some, you lose some." I shrug, before realising how apathetic I sound, and continuing. "It sucks right now. It was always gonna suck when it ended. But you ride the wave, and in a few weeks, you'll be back on top, sucking face with some new *the one*." Somehow, that sounded even more apathetic. I shoot a quick look at Bill; he doesn't seem hurt. Instead, he seems contemplative. And the question that's picking up momentum in his mind is about to come, like a fucking bowling ball, into my stable house of cards.

"Richie - how come we never talk about girls *you* like?" *Dammit*.

"I don't kiss and tell." My response is quick and silver-tongued, as usual. I hope to fucking God he'll let me off. "I find em, I fuck em, and I forget quick as I can." Then he stops, and his eyes burrow into my damn soul.

"*Seriously*, Richie." Whenever people say *seriously* to me like this, it's a bad thing. It's usually my mother, or a teacher, or Eddie, and it's always when I'm withholding something. "Why don't you talk about this stuff?"

"I just don't crush on people, I guess." Big lie. Big fucking huge fucking lie, so big I swear you can see it on my face and the way my cheeks are burning.

"Richie." He laughs. "You've been girl obsessed since second grade." He's not wrong. But you'd be surprised how often the evidence doesn't line up with the outcome.

"So?" Although I'm trying my hardest *not* to, I can sense that I'm getting a little defensive.

"So, we're best friends Richie. Talk to me." His smile is so damn kind I want to kill myself. "Who is she?" And I am stone, and I am marble, and I am still. Something must twitch on my face, because something twitches on his too, and he does all this mental arithmetic in one second flat, and I'm begging the universe to stop him in his tracks, before he gets there, before he lands and the inevitable truth, before he sees me and he sees me and I can't hide anymore and - he speaks quietly; "... he?" And just like that, my eyes are full of tears, and his are full of wonder.

"I'm not gay." It's the first thing I say, and also the least convincing thing I've ever said.

"O-OK Richie, OK." He doesn't believe me. His eyes say it; *gay, gay Richie, Richie is gay, gay gay gay...* or maybe I'm just freaking out. I take a deep breath. "So who is it?"

"Drop it, will you Bill." I try brush it off, and my voice is starting to feel a bit desperate and choked, but Bill's not letting up.

"Richie, whatever it is you're suddenly freaked out about, you can talk to me OK?" Bill Denborough is a male protagonist type. That is to say, he genuinely does mean well, and is really quite kind, but he also has an absurd need to fix people. And he's fishing for my flaws. And I'll be damned if he gets them.

"Drop it." When I say it this time, it's more stern, maybe even intimidating. I start to walk away from him, but his speech stops me in my tracks.

"I know how it feels you know." The empathy in his voice now is shaky and real. "To like someone who m-might not like you back. I know how it can feel like drowning. Like your lungs are all full up, and no matter how much you try, you can't b-breathe. I know how it feels Richie, and I can see in your face that you feel like that right now. You don't have to tell me. You don't have to explain anything. But I d-do wanna help Richie. No judgement. I just care about you. OK?" I suck in air and try stay silent. "Richie?" But the something slips at the floodgates; and it's a whirlwind all at once. I'm crying, and it's the sort of crying I usually only do in private, when shame's around and I don't have to worry about the tears still being there in the morning. But now it's broad daylight, and my face is stinging red, and my glasses are steaming a little, and I can't bring myself to look at Bill, because if I look at him it's real. But the word comes out of my mouth anyway, too fast, and I can't stop it.

"Eddie." And all at once it's more real than I was ever ready for.

4. Chapter 4

i kinda feel like this chapter is garbage but its written now pls dont abandon me x

I don't know what I thought would happen once I told Bill. In fact, I hadn't ever considered telling anyone, ever, let alone Bill. And as soon as the word had slipped out of my big fucking mouth, all the possibilities ran through my brain in flashing succession. He could ridicule me. He could out me, to everyone. Not that there's anything to out, since I'm not gay, but there'd be no telling him that now, since he knows I like a guy, which is pretty fucking gay by anyone else's standards. But that doesn't matter, it doesn't matter about other people's 'expectations' and 'standards', because they're not inside my damn brain, and I know it better. And apparently Bill does too, because he didn't do either of those horrible things. Instead, now hours later, I found myself sat on Bill's bed, looking at a piece of paper he'd pinned to the wall, which he was now writing on in sharpie;

*** project asthma ***

He'd even drawn little stars around it. I hated him. And loved him all the same.

"Project asthma?" I laugh, pointing like a kid in class. "What kinda fucking name is that?"

"W-w-well he's got his i-i-inhaler, y'know." The cute smug smile Bill wears is unavoidably endearing. "And you wanna take his b-b-breath away." I throw a pillow at him. He ducks. I throw another. Bullseye. "I'm being serious R-r-richie. I don't know a lot about this s-s-stuff. But I know about you two. I think we can make this h-happen." There's something tangible in the way he looks at me; was it hope? Joy? Whatever it is, I'm about ready to stomp it out like a dying ember.

"Woah woah woah - Bill. We're not making anything happen. At all." I can feel my cheeks burning, and it makes sense, because I'm a fucking embarrassment. "I only told you because you caught me in a moment

of weakness, and what you're gonna do is exactly what I've been doing for years; bury it so deep in your fucking psyche that, to mention it to anyone, you'd have to undergo major invasive surgery. OK?" He's just smiling at me like a fucking dweeb, like I'm some cute lovestruck bunny he wants to squish and pet, and it makes my stomach bubble.

"Richie - if you really think Eddie Kaspbrak doesn't feel the same about you, you are d-d-de-delusional." He's grinning like a fucking chimp. "Hear me out." He turns back to his sheet of paper and writes on it like a fucking teacher while I seethe quietly behind him, picking at the seams of his bedsheets with furious energy.

"Step One;" he writes as he speaks. "Maximise time with him."

"Like I'm not doing that already?" The anger in my voice might be a little overdone but, honestly, I think it's the shock of actually talking out-loud to somebody about this.

"But m-m-more." His eyes are wide and excited. "Walks to and from school, after school, s-sleepovers, more synchronised d-detentions, everything."

"Oh perfect, I'll make the sap sick of me!" Rage rage rage.

"Never in your years of friendship have either of you been s-s-sick of the other, Richie. You know that." He's not wrong. Which is fucking annoying. I slump back. "As I was saying..." He clears his throat; he's basking in the drama of all of this, while I drown in it. "Step Two; Halloween Party."

"Huh?"

"In a few weeks, Richie, Ben's h-hosting? You know this." He sighs, again, like a teacher. "Ben's parents are out of town so he's h-hosting a big h-house party." I had been told this, but I'd filtered it in my brain immediately under 'Things Richie Tozier Does Not Have Time to Care About'. "And that is when you're gonna tell Eddie how you feel."

"I'm going to fucking what?" I may as well be shouting my voice is so

burning hot.

"T-tell him." Bill's. Fucking. Smile.

"Nope. No. Nada. No Gusta. Never." I'm shaking my head like a maniac.

"Yes! And then he likes you back, and you k-kiss and then it's all s-sorted." I blink at him. He smiles back, unshaken by my adamance. I stand up swiftly, and tear down his plan. "My plan!" He yelps.

"It was two fucking steps Bill!" While I speak, I shred it into white confetti, and let it snow around us. "1) Be f-f-friends." I mimic. "2) K-k-k-k-KISS." He shoves me with a laugh.

"You've made this so b-big in your head Richie." He's right again, I have, but that's mainly because it is actually a gargantuan issue. I storm off towards his door, which he kicks shut quickly. I turn to him; my face is throbbing with raging heat.

"I'm going home." I say simply, as calm as I can muster.

"R-Richie. L-listen to me." He breathes in, then out, then in, then out, then speaks. "I can't l-lie. I don't really unders-stand how you feel. B-because I don't g-get liking b-boys. But I can tell you don't really g-get it either. You just like Eddie; that's all you know. And thats n-nice. It's so p-pure. And I can't tell you about g-gay rights, or inc-clusion, or different sexualities; but I can tell you about p-people. And you're not gonna g-get him if you don't go after him. And if you don't g-get him at a-all, you'll be miserable." I stare at him and, like before, there are pools of tears welling in my eyes; I blink them away swiftly. "I'm not s-saying do it for me, Richie. D-don't. Just do it for the boy who deserves all the l-love he's pushed away, and who d-deserves to kiss the person he l-likes. Making it about two boys, or l-labels makes it too complicated to handle." He purses his lips into perhaps the most genuine smile I've ever seen. "And it is complicated. I do know th-that. But you might think trying to g-get him will h-hurt you; you're already h-hurting, Richie. Just because you're doing it in s-s-silence doesn't make the pain any less r-real." And that's when, again, I fucking lose it; sobs, on sobs, on sobs.

"It hurts so fucking bad, Bill." I choke. He moves towards me.

"I kn-know it does bud." He holds me close in a hug. "I know." I'm a dick. Or, certainly, I can be. I'm really lucky to have my friends.

5. Chapter 5

hi everyone i was kinda down so i just wrote basically a whole chapter of soft reddie so you're welcome x

I don't know if I expected life to change drastically after the cat was out of the bag; or rather, the cat was in a new bag that Bill also had access to. I don't know if I expected things to get better, or worse, but everything was kinda boringly samey. Besides Bill giving me a fucking smug knowing smile every time I was hanging around with Eddie, nothing big changed, and 'Project Asthma' was more something we were just letting happen naturally, rather than some scheme we were handling tactically like a war advance. And, more than anything, it meant that when feelings like 'Eddie is so cute today that I want to stab myself in the pelvis and bleed to death' pop into my mind, I can vocalise them to an ever-concerned Bill, who smiles, laughs, punches me, and then just like that the feelings are processed.

Like I said at the start, I know what you're here for, so I'm not going to bore you with school shit (like how I only got one more detention in the following two weeks, thank you very much; or how Werzel Humber threw up in the cafeteria in front of everyone, and it was purple, and it was hilarious); I know it's about Eddie. So I think the best place for us to pick up is a few weeks later, at my house, a few weeks before Halloween, when school was back in full swing.

Eddie was over for a study session. Let me clarify - as much as I am absolutely in love with him, we're friends *first*, and that's something I try to maintain. Besides, I'm hardly some master seducer, so I wasn't inviting him over to make out with him in my bedroom after some convincing flirting. We were actually studying. And also probably watching a horror movie at midnight. And having a sleepover. Leave me alone.

We're both sat on my bed. It's a single, and we're sat at each end, stretch our legs out. In the middle, our legs overlap and tangle, but we're both too comfortable and stubborn to move. On his lap, there's a Spanish textbook open and, on mine, there's a copy of Romeo and

Juliet.

"Fucking garbage." I groan, closing the book, and pulling out a fresh stick of gum from my pocket.

"Could you hate incredible literature more quietly please?" Eddie sighs, turning a page.

"Incredible?" The laugh I let out is a little cackley. I wish I could suck it back in. "Why the *fuck* does she kill herself!"

"For love." He shrugs simply. I offer him some gum. He takes too. I don't mind one bit.

"For love?" Again with that fucking cackle.

"Yes, because love makes you do stupid fucking things, like Bill. One day, when you grow all your human emotions, you'll feel it too."

"It makes no sense, love or not! Did she just not stop pretending while he was ranting about killing himself? And why's it all written like there's a bunch of words missing?"

"It's *Shakespearean* English." I can't tell if he's actually trying to still study in the moment, or if he just doesn't want to entertain me by actually looking at me. "Just get a translation."

"I shouldn't need a translation for *English* Eds." I fucking shouldn't. I'm not even being deliberately facetious. I dramatically fling the book aside. "That's it. I'm not writing this paper. I refuse."

"That's real mature, Rich, real fucking mature." Eddie rolls his eyes, and stays glued to his book.

"Funny, because your mom calls me mature for my age when I give her my mature schlong." He winces.

"Gross, Rich. Fucking gross." But I can see the hint of a smile teasing at the tips of his lips, leading to his dimples. I smile proudly at this shaky moment of humour. And then, in all my maturity, I kick him in the face. "What the fuck!"

"Huh?" I jab him with my foot. "Oh this is just how I'm comfiest." I ruffle his hair with the ball of my foot. He swats it away, and jabs me in the side with his toes. I kick his textbook off his lap, and it joins Shakespeare on the floor. He grabs my sock, pulls it off, and launches it at my head; the way I dodge it is masterful and quick. I pick it straight up and throw it back at him, and it hits just right of his lips, below his nose. He gags, and I really think he might have a Kaspbrattack, but instead he just says;

"You're the single most fucking annoying person in the world, you know that Rich?" I grin at him. He can't help but smirk back.

Sometimes, when I'm more in my feelings than I am right now, I get a little hung up on these moments. For best friends, we insult each other fucking loads. And that's like our 'thing', so it's fine, but when I'm having a bad day, I worry. I know Eddie doesn't hate me or anything, and it's not like that, I just worry he maybe feels a bit trapped being my friend. I am fucking annoying. But, deep down, I know that he's fucking annoying too, and that's why we work.

"What horror movie did you rent?" His question snaps me out of my temporary emotional daze, and I look back at him.

"Oh." I reach under my bed and pull out a VHS. "Alien." And his eyes widen.

On screen, Ripley breathes heavily as she ducks behind corners and dodges random bursts of steam. Alarms blare, and the tension is high, as it is just her, the alien, and the infinity of space. It's been a pretty good movie, and I don't scare easy usually, so I've kind of just enjoyed the plot. Eddie, on the other hand, is a fucking wreck.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. The boy is shaking, screaming quietly to himself every so often, with his head buried in my shoulder. Every so often I'll poke him to make him jump, and he'll call me a dick or a bastard or some other thing, and then he'll return swiftly to my shoulder.

"I can't look, I can't fucking look." He mutters, only half to me really, it's mostly for himself.

"What's go you so shaken up Eds?" I can predict his answer almost to a tee.

"Aliens are fucking slimey, OK?" He's too fucking cute. "And therefore, they're probably also fucking bacterial. And they look like huge penises. So its weirder."

"Bacterial penises." I ponder this dramatically. "So don't you relate to them?" And he punches me. And we fall into a play fight, rolling around and poking and jabbing, and laughing until we're worn out, laying next to each-other on the floor. And the same look washes over Eddie's face that did a few weeks ago in front of his house.

"I'm gonna miss this so much." He sighs. And I sigh too. Because he's right. Night's like this have an expiration date

"So enjoy them." That's all I can offer him. And it's not enough. Suddenly, Eddie is crying next to me.

"Shit." He pokes his eyes to jam the tears in their ducts. "Fuck, sorry, fuck."

"It's OK, it's fine." ALARM SOUND. ALARM SOUND. KASPBRRATTACK. I don't know what to do, so now I'm panicking, and I'm flustered, and suddenly I'm holding him. And there's a silence. A heavy one. But then it lifts.

"You're the best friend I'll ever have Rich." He means it too.

"Probably true." I don't mean it, but still.

"Fuck you." And we're laughing. And its that sad sort of laughter that covers something deeper, but we settle for it. And we settle, too, into a comfortable warm silence. We lay there until he falls asleep.

Then I untangle myself from him, put a blanket over him, and return to my bed, where I sleep until morning - alone. Because we are *friends first*. And I am more than happy with that.

6. Chapter 6

Halloween is objectively the best holiday, and that is a fact. The combination of creepy costumes, cheap candy and curfew-free chaos makes for, undoubtedly, the best night of the year. Maybe it's just my obsession with the obscene, but my affinity with Halloween seems to just get bigger and bigger every year. This year is no different. My costumes the past few years have been genius; a shirt that said costume, an armless hobo and Eddie's mom, just to name some highlights. This year is different though; it must be, because I'm in a costume shop with Bill, and he's stressing a lot.

"It's got to be perfect." He rifles through the racks like a man on a mission. I pull one out and show him.

"Clown?" It's a bag containing a white clown mask with a red nose and red afro hair bushing at either side of the head, and a yellow jumpsuit with red fuzzy buttons and purple and green striped sleeves. It's kind of cute. Kind of terrifying. Bill scowls at me, and keeps looking. "What, too soon?"

"It's important that your costume is great, Richie Your fate d-depends on it." Bill; all about the overstatement. He shows me a turtle costume.

"Fucking stupid." I groan. "Why would I wear a turtle?" He shrugs.

"Turtles are c-c-c-cool." And then it seems like he doesn't even know why he showed me it. When he puts it back, the little bell near the door rings and Ben and Stan come in.

"Good morrow, fine gentlemen." Ben says for a laugh. He gets a few, but none from me.

"Hey." Stan says simply with a smile. I smile back at him. When it's Stan, you've just got to smile back. "I'm going as a zombie. It's simple."

"It's b-b-boring." Bill jokes; Stan flicks him; they laugh. I like Stan and Bill's friendship. There's a purity there, and it's not unlike Eddie and I.

For a second I entertain the thought that there might be more there, but I shake the thought away; not every fucking loser in Derry falls in love with their best friend. That's just me.

"I'm going as Shakespeare." Ben seems genuinely proud of this idea.

"Shakespeare isn't s-scary." Bill furrows his brow.

"S-s-sure it is Bill." I laugh. "He could bore you to death." I roll my eyes back in my head, and everyone laughs. Well, apart from Ben, but two out of three isn't bad. "Bill's going as Michael Myers. I need a good costume idea. It's urgent." I say this quickly and simply before Bill can say more than I want him to see, to him, this is still part of Project Asthma. That is to say, my costume is important, apparently, because I'm going to make a move at the party. I'm not, at all, by the way. But Bill's too persistent to talk him down at this point. And I do want a cool costume.

"Why don't you ask Eddie?" Stan asks, almost like he knows. But a quick glance from Bill ensures me that he doesn't know. "Last I checked, he didn't have any ideas. So you two could maybe plan something together. You are kinda the dynamic duo." He's not wrong. At the thought of his idea my heart gets all mushy, and the snakes in my stomach wake up, and before I can blurt a demanding 'NO', Bill speaks -

"I think that's a great idea." One day, I'm gonna cut his smug smile right off his damn face.

The next day, me and Eds were walking back from school, and we stopped at the ravine that passed under the bridge to skip stones and find frogs. We never did grow up really, when I think about it. Incidentally, this is the same spot under the bridge where Henry Bower's cousin Zachary - all blonde and befreckled - kissed me and then ran away all those years ago. I don't think about that often. When I do, the shame creeps back in. Not right now of course though; never when I'm with Eddie.

The town of Derry is all about Halloween. They love decorating everything in orange and varying shades of brown, and putting

pumpkins on anything with a flat surface. It's pretty great vibes, I can't lie; I've got no time for summer, and no time for winter. But fucking fall is the best. Eddie agrees, but only because spring means more pollen and therefore more allergies, summer means more time outside and therefore more risk, and winter means cold which means colds.

"I'm stilling having nightmare about those fucking aliens." Precious. Eddie skips a stone.

"Use anti-bacterial hand wash and you'll be fine." I jeer, and skip one too. "Halloween in a few days."

"I stole some wine from my mom's secret stash for Ben's party." Eddie is adorable. Shit, sorry, not necessary. "It'll be fun."

"Wine?" I laugh too hard it's even annoying me. "OK, Miss Kaspbrak, glad you'll be joining us."

"Fuck you, Rich." He sighs and sneers with a smirk. I find a little frog, but it hops away from me so fast that I lose sight of it pretty quick.

"It'll be a good party." I say nonchalantly. "Don't know what I'm gonna go as though. I want to make it good." This is the moment, you know. Where he's supposed to say he doesn't know either, and then I suggest we match, and its natural, and normal, and platonic, and fine. Only that's not what he says.

"Oh yeah. Carrie, in my Psych class, is going, and asked if I'd go as the Fred to her Daphne." It's a punch straight to my fucking gut. "I said sure. I had nothing better planned."

Dear reader, this pisses me off in ways I can't put down on paper or I could get arrested. He barely knows her, he's not even fucking blonde, and he's never mentioned any fucking interest in the bitch, and now they're going in a couples costume. I warn you, dearest fucking reader, this was some horrible foreshadowing. For the Halloween party which, as you'll see momentarily, ruined everything.

7. Chapter 7

CW; alcohol, lots of it. f-slur. slut shaming, minor. also this chapter is just like .. a lot.

My costume, not that anybody fucking cares, ended up being a zombie too, because I got so annoyed that I left it until last minute, and Stan had spare makeup. So I ripped up a shirt a little, threw on some fake blood, and turned up. Ben's house was nice, but right now, it was fucking empty. So I got busy in the kitchen, mixing a drink. They say not to drink on an empty stomach or a heavy heart, but here I am doing both and, honestly, I can't say I'm concerned. I need to break from it all right now. With the Eddie stuff being more exhausting than ever before, I was losing sleep, losing appetite, losing sex drive (yes, *losing sex drive*); I was a mess. So, yes, I should really sit this one out but, no, I'm not going to, so just buckle up and shut up. I take a shot. It stings, but pain is relative anyway.

Bill's costume is pretty great; it's this navy blue boiler suit with sticky blood patches on it and, even though he ditches the Michael Myers mask pretty early into the night, it's cool. The intention is clear. Ben just looks like a fucking nerd, and that is that on that. He carried a quill around with him. I can't fault his dedication to being a fucking dweeb. Stan's zombie is cool, but not as cool as my zombie, because I did realistic blood coming out of my ears like my brain is rotted out, but I like his all the same. I haven't seen Eddie yet. I imagine he's arriving with Carrie. Which is fine, fucking fine, *and* not my problem. I take another shot

The party takes about an hour to get busy. Ben is *not* popular, but an open invite is an open invite, so about forty people turn up in the end. There's loud music in his living room that fills almost the whole house with its relentless throbbing. Alcohol's in the kitchen. That means I'm mainly in the kitchen, too. I take another shot.

I lose track of time pretty quickly. At some point later, Bill does a shot with me (I think I was very persuasive) and then he sits me down at the kitchen table for a conversation. Drunk deep chats are

kind of a thing in our friend group. Tonight is no exception. I take another shot.

"Richie, Richie, Richie." Bill repeats words when he's drunk. "How are you feeling?" He also doesn't stutter. It's so weird.

"I'm fine." My mouth still burns.

"No no no no no no no." I lose count of how many times he says it. "How are you *feeling*?" He prods my chest where I imagine he thinks my heart is. It hurts a little.

"My chest hurts."

"Right right right." He nods like a fucking therapist. "Because you miss him."

"Because you just poked my fucking ribs, Bill."

"Deflection." He hums and strokes his chin like he's thinking. "You love him, right? You do, you love him."

"Bill, can you shut the fuck up?" I'm being paranoid. The house is too loud for anyone to listen to us.

"Shhh shhh shh shhh." How fucking dare he. "Love is a weird thing." He rolls his neck and closes his eyes tight, before opening them. "Bev." Here we fucking go. "Eddie. He's your Bev." Idiot. "Well, he's your *my* Bev, you know?" I stare at him. "Like where I've got a Bev you've got an Eddie, you know?" I blink. I take another shot.

"Sure Bill, right." He's a fucking idiot.

"I love her." He's in a daze again. I hand him a shot. He takes it in one. "Gross, gross, gross, gross. Tequila tastes like spicy."

"Tequila *tastes like spicy*?" I laugh back at him. We fall into a chaotic flurry of laughter. He hugs me suddenly.

"I'm sorry, Richie." He's so sincere.

"What for?"

"Love." And I know just what he means. I'm sorry for it too.

Carrie Porton is a fucking bitch. I say this *not* because she seems to be making a move on Eddie with this costume ordeal, but because she is, in fact, walking human garbage. This thought has played over and over again in my mind for the past few minutes. Or maybe I mean hours. I take another shot. And she's a slut. I don't know anything about her personal life or her sex life, but I imagine her *doing things* to Eddie, all slutty and needy and gross, and it makes me sick. Or maybe that's the tequila. I drink some water quickly. And then a shot to wash it down. It's hours before they arrive. And when they do, everything is fucking slow motion, and it's just me and them in the room.

She looks fucking beautiful, which is a nightmare. She's wearing this purple dress, and it clings tight to her curves and around her chest, and she's walking like she knows she makes every boy think about sex when she enters a room. Hell, even I'm thinking about it. Her red hair drifts soft down onto her shoulders like water, and her face wears a smile so warm that I get mad. I want to hate her. I want to hate her so bad. But I can't. She's not a bad guy, and she's not a hag. Eddie walks in quickly behind her. I'm winded.

He's got a white sweater over a blue shirt with an orange cravate; his costume is perfect. He's stuck with brown hair (which makes no sense, but whatever) but it's OK because his face screams Fred. It's soft and happy and powerful, and it sucks me straight in. It might have been Bill's fault when my chest hurt earlier, but it isn't his fault anymore. My heart burns like it's trying to get out. The snakes tangle up like warring serpents. I might be sick. I take another shot.

"Pour me one, Rich." Eds says by way of greeting, and squeezes my shoulder. I do. We do a shot together. He's gone as soon as he arrived. Socialising. Smiling. Being fucking brilliant. Eddie Kaspbrak is brilliant.

I sit alone for a while. The room smells of tequila and sweat and people and noise, and my head is spinning so fast, and I'm getting dizzier with every breath. Richie Trashmouth Tozier, no friends, not once the jokes run out. Just basic fucking Richie, the loser, the loner,

the *fag*. That word bounces around in my head, in the voices of every person I've ever known. Bowers. Beverly. Ben. Mike Stan. Bill. Eddie. Eddie. Eddie. I don't know when I walked to the bathroom, but right now, I just know I'm throwing up. But no amount of upheaval gets that word out of my system. Maybe it's stuck in my bloodstream, like a virus. Eddie would wince at the thought. Maybe it's so innate that it'll infect my cells one by one, and it'll kill me one day. Maybe shame will watch me rot away at the hands of it; fag, fag, *fag*.

And then Eddie. I don't know when he arrived. I don't know how long he'd been there. But he's there.

"Rich. Hey, Rich." My eyes focus on him. Barely. "Hey, man, hey. You're alive."

"Drunk." It's the only word I can form right now. I don't know why, but shame is in the room too. Also, I notice, I'm a bit covered in vomit.

"Can we get you cleaned up buddy?" Before I can respond, he's helping me to the sink. He's good.

"Carrie." The word slips out. It doesn't even feel like I said it.

"Yeah, she went home a bit after we arrived. Doesn't like parties. She's got her mom to take care of, you know?" Oh my fucking god. Carrie is the one with a sick mom. I'm a horrible person. He pats water on my shirt to rinse off the vomit.

"Sorry." This is the first word I've said that makes sense. Because I am.

"Sorry?" He laughs. I melt. "Nothing to be sorry for, bud. Just want you to be safe." He means it as well. He's too fucking nice. He cleans me up, and hands me a cup of water, which I gargle, and then spit out. I'd be a mess without him. That probably goes without saying right now, but it's a fact. My mind is running away about it, which is why the next thing comes out of my mouth;

"Love you." And it's quiet, but audible, and it's impossible to take back. My heart races faster than it ever has before, and I think I

might throw up again, but Eddie smiles.

"I love you too, man." And his tone is fixed; we are *friends*. And everyone loves their *friends*. He hugs me. I hug him back. "You're a fucking idiot." He adds. "But I love you all the same." When we're done cleaning up, he helps me back into the kitchen, where he finishes his drink. "Right - I think I'm gonna head home. I had a pretty boring night, since my *date* left and my *best friend* went AWOL." The first word stings. The second heals it a bit. "But I'm glad I found you."

"Me too." I say simply. We say goodbye a couple more times, and then he's just gone. As simply as he came. Vanished. I'm left in his wake. As usual.

I'm sat on a step in the garden, smoking a cigarette, when Stan comes to sit with me. I've been thinking for a while, and I did a few more shots, and the night had wound down around me without me even noticing. The sky was that shade of blue it goes before the sun comes up again. Below it now, there's us, two tired zombies, drunk, and full of feelings we don't talk about enough.

"They didn't kiss, you know?" He says it, and I know what he means.

"Oh?" I feign disinterest. It's probably not convincing. "Shame. Eds could do much worse." Me. I'm worse.

"Stop it, Richie." I'm seen, suddenly. So seen. "I know." My face burns up. I drop my cigarette.

"But - "?"

"I don't want you to deny it, or lie to me, OK? I know, because I have working eyes, and a heart, it's OK, OK?" I nod because I don't know what else to do. "You know he loves you too, right?" I laugh back at him.

"You're wrong." That's all I know to say. I'm so exhausted.

"Eddie has talked to us approximately one thousand times about his emetophobia." The word rings a bell. I have no idea whatsoever what

he's getting at. He rolls his eyes at me with a smirk. "Eddie is so cripplingly scared of vomit, Richie." It takes a second for me to get it. "He cleaned you up. He picked you up, dripping in God knows how many germs, and he cleaned you. That reeks of two things; stupidity, and genuine care. The two key ingredients to love."

"You got the stupidity part right." I groan. I look at him. He's gonna say something, but then he doesn't, so I let the silence hang for a bit, willing him to speak, eventually he does.

"The reason I guessed is because you remind me of me." He breathes slowly. In, then out, then in, then out. He closes his eyes when he says it; "Richie. I'm in love with Bill." I don't know what to say. Of course he is. How could he ever have not been? How could I have ever doubted it? Turns out I can be pretty stupid when I get caught up in my own problems.

"OK." *OK* is what Stan and Bill both said to me about Eddie. So it's what makes sense to say back. Stan seems relieved to hear it, and suddenly, I understand him perfectly.

"It's pretty lonely, isn't it?" He frowns. "Being in love with someone like that? It's like the important parts of you are invisible, because they'll never see you the way you want them to see you." The way he puts it is perfect. And it hits me right in the heart. Bill has talked to me about the whole thing at length now, but he said it himself - he doesn't *get it*. Stan does. And I'm not alone anymore. Maybe that's why it happened.

We were silent.

I was thinking about Eddie. For a second, my mind wandered.

He turned to me. I turned too.

My brain still buzzed with alcohol and a headache and tiredness, and I wasn't thinking, I think.

Stan tasted like tequila. Or maybe I did. It was hard to pick us apart. And we did it for centuries, or seconds. I'm not too sure.

And just like that, once we parted, everything was a fucking mess.

Somehow, in one swift swing, I had ruined everything.

8. Chapter 8

It was a few days later now. The events of the Halloween party circle tauntingly in my head like a hangover, and often leave me babbling to himself about alcohol and stupidity. On Sunday afternoon, I found myself sat on an embankment near the Barrands, staring at the stream as it slips by like a breeze, and watching myself on rewind in my mind.

"Love you." And it's quiet, but audible, and it's impossible to take back.

"I love you too, man." And his tone is fixed; we are friends.

Everyone loves their friends.

It's hard to process it, really, because it's not a bad thing to be loved by a friend. It can't be, ever, not even when you love that friend the way I do. So I can't mope or cry, or scream, or beg the universe for some different reality; because I am, unavoidably, lucky to be loved by Eddie Kaspbrak - in whatever way his love takes shape. I shake my head at myself; the only person breaking my heart is Richie Tozier.

The Stan thing is pretty concrete proof of that. And now, without a blip, this plays in my mind too, in embarrassing and unforgiving slow-motion.

We were silent. He turned to me. I turned too.

Stan tasted like tequila. Or maybe I did.

We did it for centuries, or seconds. I'm not too sure.

I was the one who tasted like fucking tequila, and I know that because, in hindsight, Stan tasted like cherry wine. Sweet; and also, somehow, so fucking sour. I've done a lot of stupid shit in my life. I've pushed people away, hurt those who loved me, walked alone into a room full of fake clowns while exploring a derelict house - I could go on. But kissing Stanley Uris is the wine-soaked cherry on the top of my already tragic cake. And then there's that issue, too; kissing him. Or, being kissed by him. Or mutually kissing. I don't remember the

details at all. And after it happened we babbled quick goodbyes and excuses of "I'm drunk", "It's late" - there was no clarification. I've not heard from him since. And the clarity is trapped behind this wall of silence, and it's terrifying because; if I kissed him, why would I do that? If he kissed me, why would he? All the questions floated in the air as footsteps approached. And a voice; a kind one.

"Hey, Rich." Eddie is wearing a T-Shirt that says Derry on it - this means it is laundry day - and shorts that make him look like a girl scout. It's cute; because it always fucking is.

"Eds." That's all I say, and it sounds pretty stupid, so I force out further response; "Hey. How did you...?"

He jumps in with the answer. "I couldn't find you anywhere, so I was gonna check the clubhouse. Lucky for me, you're sat on my route." He smiles and sits alongside me. And then he says something totally unexpected. "Apparently, I owe you an apology."

"Huh?" I'm dumbfounded, and a little concerned.

"Bill talked to me." I gulp so audibly that it sounds like a joke. He continues; "I didn't know you wanted to do a costume thingy with me, Rich. If I'd have known, I'd have absolutely wanted to. Carrie asked and I..." My face is so flushed I wanna peel my damn skin off. "I got caught up in the popular thing, you know? And I'm not good looking, obviously, because genetics aren't on my side, but I'm also not ugly, so when she asked me, I believed it, you know? I believed I was good enough to do a popular thing for once. And it's stupid because I don't even fucking care about that shit. Or I shouldn't, at least." I look at his face, and it's kind of melty and serious, like he might cry or scream. "But I ran away with it. I wanted to run away from being wheezy, dorky, short-stack Eddie Kaspbrak for one night, so I ran. But I didn't get very far." I let a silence hang for a second, because I think that's what's best. Eventually, he speaks again. "I found out it was a bet, you know? Carrie and her friends had a bet on who could perform the best upgrade on a loser, and you know the saddest part? I didn't even win." The pain in his voice now tugs at my arteries and makes it hard to breathe, so I turn and I hold him. I feel him smiling into my shoulder. We part. "And I should've asked you if you wanted to do a costume thing. It would've been incredible. So I'm

sorry. And I hereby swear to never try my hand at fitting in again." I inhale. Slowly.

"You don't have to say sorry Eds." I throw him a soft punch to the arm to try and lighten everything a little. And then I pout sarcastically. "And genetics may not be on your side, Eduardo, but I think you're beautiful." I pinch his cheeks teasingly, watching him struggle as his wriggles from my grasp, and we both laugh like maniacs. I think for a moment though, and something else crosses my mind about that night, and I speak with a little panic. "I need to apologize. Shit. You cleaned up vomit for me, Eds. That's like a limb amputation."

He laughs and shrugs. "I just bathed in hand sanitizer afterwards, don't worry." He's playing it off, but a little of me thinks he isn't actually joking. He does always smell like rubbing alcohol. He stands up and holds his hand out to me. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" I ask as he holds my hand and yanks me up; I try not to dwell on the sensation.

"Well, that Halloween party was pretty much a bust for the both of us." He doesn't know the half of it. "So I'm taking you to see a scary movie to make up for that. I figure we still deserve some Halloween horrors that are a little less socially traumatizing and/or vomity."

"Eddie Kaspbrak!" I gasp and clutch my chest dramatically. "Are you asking me on a date? What will your mother think!" It's a joke that hits a little close to home for me, but he'll never know that, and it makes him smile, so it's worth the little blip of pain in my pulse.

"You're a freak, Richie Tozier." He shakes his head as we walk.

"And you love it." And I know he does. Because Eddie does love me, at least - in his way. And when we watch the movie, we laugh together and hide behind my jacket together, and our friendship flourishes the way it always does in private. And as the movie comes to a screeching climax, all blood and bodies, he holds my hand and squeezes whenever he starts to freak out. I become his lifeline. And I know, in a quieter part of my head, that this isn't all I want. But right now, it's more than enough.

9. Chapter 9

Stanley Uris hasn't been in school for two days. This is important, and strange. It's pretty known amongst the Losers that Stan's mental health runs on pretty rock and turbulent waters, and we've all talked him through some very dark shit in our time as friends. He's the best kind of person; he has energy and time for every person around him in a way that's so obnoxiously kind it makes me a little nauseous. But a side effect of being such a person is that he has little time for himself, I think. Sometimes if you look at him when nobody else is, you see something falter in his expression, like a glitch; like some deep voice inside him begging him to let it all out. And in that second, every time, he looks like he might cry. But he doesn't.

It's the Tuesday evening that I decide I need to go see him. Because I care about him, and because I'm sure whatever he's going through is at least partly my fault, and because there's this tiny quiet whisper in my head that's worried something is *really* wrong. Like, *forever* wrong. I pick up the pace.

The Uris family are good people. His mom and dad always seemed a bit intense, but in such a religious family, I guess that makes sense. The older Stanley got, the more he grew out of their Judaism, but his core beliefs still aligned; love, compassion, growth. When I arrive at their house I drop my bike on their empty driveway. 'It's a good sign that the drive is empty,' I tell myself, 'because if something was *really* wrong, his parents would stay home.' I'm still a little frantic as I bounce up the drive. Without hesitating much at all, I let myself in.

"Stan." I say it loudly, but something feels wrong about shouting. My chest is tight. I walk lightly up the stairs towards his room. At the top of the staircase, immediately parallel, is the bathroom. The door is pushed almost closed. There's something fuzzy in my brain that tells me to walk in, to check the bathroom first, to make sure that...

"Hello?" A voice utters from another room. *Stan*. I bound to his room and stand in the doorway.

"Hey." It's all I know to say.

"Richie." It's not a greeting; more a statement of fact.

Stanley is laying in bed, blanket low at his waist, face baggy with sleepless skin. He looks exhausted. And his eyes are red, and if I didn't know Stanley I'd think he was high, but I do know Stanley so I know he's been crying. My heart throbs.

"Can I come in?" I'm a dickhead, and this is a known fact, but in moments like this I'm so careful with boundaries that it's kind of absurd.

"You already did." He shrugs. Fair point. I enter, swaying around on the spot awkwardly for a second, before sitting on the edge of the bed very carefully.

"How you doing?" Stupid *fucking* question, Rich.

"Fine." Stupid answer, Stanley.

"The other night..." I begin, because it seems like the right place to begin.

"I said I'm fine, Richie." I only notice now that he's barely looking at me.

"OK." I paused. Sigh. "But I fucking know you, Stan. And you're not fine. And that's OK. You can be upset, sad, angry, pissed, heartbroken, you can..."

"Richie, can you stop talking?" It's not mean, not when Stanley says it. It sounds light. I nod. "I'm sorry about the other night. I shouldn't have kissed you. I'm all over the place right now, Richie. The Bill thing is getting worse and worse, and we're leaving soon, and the thought of not having you guys makes me want to disappear. And on top of that there's this fucking cloud over me, like a storm, and it's so hard to be happy anymore." I notice now he's crying a little. "It's like I'm being suffocated. And the you thing, the kiss, is such a small drop in the ocean. So, genuinely, Richie, I appreciate you coming over, but that night is the last thing on my mind." I look at him. My chest burns.

"Can I hug you?" I ask because, as I said; careful. He nods slowly. We

hug for a second. Then the sobs start. And he's shaking, and sobbing, and the noise makes my heart scream to do something, but I've done everything I can do, and I know that; being here with him is enough. After a little while, we part, and he looks at me.

"You're a good person, Richie." He sniffles. "Even though you act like - well, the way you act is kind of the worst. But you're good, Richie. Thank you." I don't really know why, but I cry too now. I panic, jab the tear away, and smile.

"Doesn't matter how much you compliment me Stan," I grin. ", not gonna kiss you again" And then we laugh for a while. And the warmth makes Stan seem more alive, more present. I'm so so glad for it.

10. Chapter 10

I think a lot about Stan after that. In truth, I think a lot about everything. People write me off; Richie Trashmouth Tozier, floating through life like some kite in the wind, but its not true at all. If anything, I think about everything too fucking much; too much for my own good, at least. When I left Stan's I rode back to my house, and lay in bed staring at the ceiling for a while. The sky outside was a murky blue fogged with sparse clouds, and the noise of Derry was grinding to a halt for the day. My bedroom was a mess; all posters and piles of clothes I'd not sorted yet. 'It's poetic,' I'd joke whenever my mom asked me to clean. And when she'd demand to know how exactly such a mess was poetic, I'd respond ', because life's one fucking big mess, isn't it!' And I'd laugh and she'd get mad and then I'd shut my door and not even consider cleaning the place.

Derry was a wild place to be. The town felt like a polaroid picture of the rest of the world a few years ago, all dusty and quaint. Maybe it was the clown thing from all those summers ago, but something inside me always itched to escape the place. Some deep part of me knew, maybe only in secret, that I couldn't stay in derry any longer than I absolutely had to. Towns like that - small ones, with tight communities and loose lips - suffocate you the older you get. As kids, it felt like we had infinities to explore around Derry; now, we know its a bubble and, no matter how endless it feels, there are strict endings to such a place. I don't hate it, not at all. How could I? The things Derry had given me were invaluable; friends, memories, the knowledge that I have the power to kill and shapeshifting clown, and Eds. Even his name swirling around my head makes me dizzy. I smile, and think on something else.

I'm applying to NYU. Nobody knows that, and I don't have any plans to tell anybody about it, but I want to study film at NYU. Once I'd realised I needed to get out of Derry, I'd quickly realised too that I needed to go somewhere completely different. New York City is the complete antithesis of Derry; the buildings are huge, and they're building new ones all the time, and there's so many people, and it's easy to be 'you' in New York because there's less people looking. And if I ever did want to make it as a comedian, which I'm not too sure I

do, New York has got to be the place to be, right? It sure as hell isn't Derry fucking Maine.

Eds isn't going to New York. Or anywhere, actually. As far as I'm aware, he plans to stay in Derry for a while; probably for his mother. I try not to think on that detail too much, because it gets me so upset and frustrated for Eds. This is partly because he deserves better than to care for that bitch, and partly because she doesn't like me. That's a big part of the reason she's a bitch. The thing is, I know that, if this was a movie, Eds would end up coming to New York City with me too, and we'd live together as friends, and then fall in love, and then settle down in the big city together. But this isn't a movie; this is my shitty life. And none of that is going to happen.

I'm many many things, but at my core I'm a realist. I know its all well and good to sit and fantasise about Eds, and to think about holding him, and kissing him, and... the rest of it. But I also know that those things don't work out that way, especially not for me. And I know Eds is straight. Truth be told, though, the more I think about it, the more I think all of those labels are bullshit anyway. I am not gay; I don't wanna bone guys all the time, and I definitely have liked girls before, and I don't feel gay. I just like Eddie. A lot. But if I have to put a label on that feeling, its like watering down every part of who I am based on one feeling I have. It's bullshit. And I think about it a lot. Just like I think about sex a lot because, duh, its awesome, but also because that's confusing too. I must wanna bone dudes because I do wanna ... have sex ... with Eddie when I think about it. But I do also wanna do that with girls, but not when I'm caught up in the Eds stuff. And I don't even know what sex with dudes is, since there's nothing about it in Sex Ed, but I know enough to know that Eds doesn't have a vagina. I got a general idea from something someone said at school - but that sounded painful and unlikely, so I doubt it was accurate.

Once all of that stuff has whirred round in my head for a while, I get a headache, and an untimely visitor too. I sigh. I do what I have to do; sigh, zip, sigh. The loneliness of this feeling really is sickening, but I get on with it again. I feel warm against myself in the silence. And then there he is, in my head; Eds. He's dressed as Fred. I close my eyes tight, trying to ignore everything but the feeling. My breathing is heavy, and I try to stifle it. I do for a while. After a while

longer, though, I'm getting to the conclusion, and everything is fuzzy, and I'm gasping a little, and then its over as simply as it had started. There's a tragedy in it, isn't there. People usually think about sex when they do this stuff, but I don't know what I want to do with Eds, because I don't know how any of it works. So I just think about him. Because, at the core of it, I know that's all I really want.

Shame is in the room again now. I mutter "fuck off", largely to no-one at all. I feel so weird all the time now, like the skin I'm in doesn't really fit right anymore. Out of nowhere, I think about Eds some more, and I stand up. I turn to my desk, and quickly scrawl the following down;

*when you can't breathe
i hold you;
you don't know
i'm breathless.*

Fucking brilliant. Am I Ben fucking Hanscom now?

11. Chapter 11

My head's a fucking mess, pretty much always, and this is now a fact that I have generally accepted. In a positive sense, my day-to-day is no longer plagued by the reality of my obsession with Eddie and my kiss with Stan. In a negative sense, however, my night time depression rate is at an all time high. I walk to school with Bill the next day, and it's the first time we've had the opportunity to talk in private since the Halloween party. I can see it in his eye's as soon as he starts talking; he's in serious planning mode.

"You f-f-fucked it up." He sighs, shaking his head at me.

"How? It was fine!" He knows everything, apart from the Stan thing. Because I decided I couldn't be the one to out Stan to him. That wouldn't be fair.

"You didn't follow the s-steps, Richie!" He counts on his fingers. "Maxim-m-mise time, step one. Tell him how you feel, step t-two. Project Asthma!"

"P-p-p-p-project Asthma!" I mock, and heckle. "Billy, there is no Project anything! It's not happening."

"N-n-not with that attitude." His smile, and the certainty in it, makes me want to die. "L-listen, the party was a s-setback. I think if we work on this we can end up in a better p-p-position from it." I can practically hear the cogs whirring in his stuttering psyche. Billy is a genius, I think, sometimes. I think that's why he's gonna wind up doing something fantastic and successful. The way he thinks is so determined and bright that it cannot be stifled. I'm sure I could do with a bit of that energy, but that's not gonna happen.

"Bill, we have to drop it." I don't know how to sound stern, but I figure this is close enough. "I had a whole drunken episode at that party because of the Eddie thing. I just need to drop it and move on."

"You had a drunken episode because Eddie was with a g-g-girl." As usual, William Denborough is right. "The easiest way to stop that from happening in the future is to make sure that, from n-now on,

he's with you." He winks. I sigh.

"Eddie Kaspbrak is not gay." The words sting as they hop off my tongue.

"S-so? Neither is Richie Tozier." He jabs at me. He's got me there, I suppose. I punch him in the arm. "L-look Richie. I refuse to r-r-rest until we're both happy, and in l-love." And I sigh again. Mainly because I'm thinking of Eds. But also because I'm thinking of Stanley, and how much he loves Bill, and it makes my heart hurt. I'd do anything to make Project Stenborough work out too.

I want to tell you a story now. And it's an important one; it might not seem important to the Eds situation, but its perhaps the most important story there is to tell about my brain and what's going on inside my head. It's a sad story, and a simple story, and a sappy fucking story. And it's about Zachary Bowers.

Zach Bowers was a good guy. I need to start off by saying that. See, that summer, when I fought with Bill and everything fell apart, I got really lonely really quickly. Eddie's mom had him under house arrest, because of the arm thing, so I was kicking around this ghost town mostly on my lonesome, trying to make the days pass quickly, as if I knew someday soon something big would happen. You probably think that big 'thing' was Beverly getting kidnapped, but that was the second of two ruptures in my world; the first was Zach. We met, at the start of it all, at the arcade, when he cut me in line for Street Fighter.

"Hey, fuckface!" I've always had such a way with words. He spun around and I got my first proper look at him; blonde curly hair, freckles, the lot.

"Shit. Sorry." He stumbled back. "You go." He flailed his arms in a gesture for me to go ahead.

"Thanks." I nod quickly, because I didn't want to look at him for too long. But something kicked in my stomach. I spun around. "We can play together. If you like." And suddenly my pulse is going, like machine gun fire, all crazy and loud and shakey. But he looked at me

and offered this stupid, small little smile; it was a smile that was going to be pretty fucking influential for a while.

So, we played Street Fighter. We did that a lot, actually; most days. We'd meet at the arcade, play for an hour or so, grab lunch from this shitty grocery store around the corner, and then keep playing until the sun vanished behind the tall buildings of the high street, and the dark called us home. Zach was a good guy; he loved to read, and he painted things, and his favourite colour was yellow, and he'd moved to Derry so recently that he really had nobody. I could relate to that. A week or so into our routine, we started spending time together beyond the arcade, too. He slept at my house a couple times, and we talked on the phone a lot. It shames me to admit that the whole thing let me forget about Eds for a while; since Eddie had been plunged into complete radio silence by his mom, I really didn't see anything else I could do. And then came that night, at my house; a lighting storm.

We were sat on my bed, playing Truth or Dare. Maybe that was deliberate, because in hindsight that choice of game seemed so stupid, but then it had made so much sense. It's funny what time does to these things, in retrospect. I'd basically walked straight into it; I'd been complicit; I wanted it.

"Truth." I laughed, smoking a cigarette out of my window and tapping the ashes out into the rain.

"OK." He furrowed his brow tentatively and stroked his chin; a big show for a question I know now he'd already had in his head since the beginning. "Have you really ever kissed someone?"

"Yes." I jeered back, a little too quickly.

"Who?" He snapped with a laugh.

"Nope, I answered your truth." My smile was smug as I sucked back more smoke.

"Bullshit." His face was flushing and mine was too. "Who?" He jabbed me, and I recoiled.

"I'm not fucking answering." I took another drag.

"Well, that doesn't count as answering my truth then." Zach whined; I grinned.

"Fine then; dare." If I could have taken anything back, it would've been that moment, because in that moment I changed everything by taunting him like that; dare me. You won't. The silence was thick.

"I dare you to..." And I'll never know what he was going to say, not really, but I'm sure I could guess. Because then, just like that, he leant to me and kissed me lightly, like an animal testing the boundaries of its new home – careful, and quiet. He stopped almost immediately and hovered near my face, eyes closed, frozen. And that was when I kissed him back. Soon enough the soft footsteps of his mouth on mine became a stomping march, heavy and hard. Maybe I was wrong; maybe the warring serpents aren't in your stomach when emotions go awry; maybe the warring serpents are in your mouth, when tongues tangle and twist themselves in knots. So, then I was laid back on my bed, and he was on top of me, and there were hands in new and dangerous places, and I couldn't breathe, but I didn't mind because suffocating on him tasted sweet.

We didn't do anything. Nothing more than that at least. I think we both wanted to, but I think we felt silently like anything more would've been too deep, or too real. Strange really, how your mind works once you've passed the point of no return. Some things become so easy to rationalise, and others are locked up in impossibility. We kissed for a while; by the time we'd finished, his shirt was on the floor and mine was unbuttoned. When we stopped, it was like snapping out of a trance. Neither of us knew how we'd gotten to the point we'd ended up at; we only knew that our clothes needed to go back on and he needed to go home.

The next day, we feigned normality as long as possible. But then he panicked when Henry Bowers passed through the arcade. And Zach called me a fairy; and Henry called me a faggot; and I ran so fast into nowhere that I got caught up in a nightmare along the way. I never spoke to Zach again after that, though he tried to reach out a bunch of times. The worst part of it all is that, in truth, I don't hate him, because I never could. I understand the panic; the fear; the same. I

understand why you would do anything to deny that ultimate truth, even if it hurts people along the way. And I understand that the kiss changed his world, because it changed mine too. Sometimes, I can't shake the feeling of that kiss, and it's dangerous electricity.

12. Chapter 12

tw; homophobic slurs; self-harm

I don't know why Zach's on my mind. Maybe it's all the shit with Stan - since that *was* my first kiss since Zach. Maybe it's the feeling that the Eds situation is somehow escalating, coming to a head, even though nothing has happened yet. Maybe it's because, in some other sense, I know that shit is about to get really serious, and things are going to change again in a big way, and I'm gonna have to try keep my footing along the way. I shake the thought. Ultimately, I have no fucking clue how my head works. I love to front and act like some cocky, all-knowing God, but in truth, I'm kind of just fumbling along and hoping for the best. I know how bad I need advice, pretty much at all times, but I'll be damned if I go out of my way to ask for it. The Universe seems to know that; that's why the house phone rings that night, and my mom says it's for me.

"Hello?"

"Hey sweetie." The voice at the other end is fuzzy, but sweet and unmistakable; Beverly Marsh. She talks like summertime.

"Bev!" I grin like a maniac.

"Trashmouth." I can almost hear her smile too. "How's everything?"

"Great!" I lie. "Really great."

"Uh-huh." Beverly sees right through me when I lie to her in person, but I'm not too sure of how that dynamic plays out over the phone. "I called Bill yesterday." *Damn fucking shit fucking dammit.*

"Oh?" *Play dumb, Richie; style this shit out.*

"Yeah. He was telling me all about some vague crisis you're going through?" I hear her pop gum. I fucking miss her. I'm also, for a moment, saved from my anxiety by how grateful and surprised I am by Bill; he spoke to Bev, of course, but he didn't tell her; not really. "He made it sound like he was totally heroing it, coaching you

through it, but I know Bill and I know how he exaggerates. And how he tries to impress me." She's always too smart for her own good.

"That's Bill." It's all I can offer her.

"It is." Her voice sounds like the impatient tapping of a foot. "So, what's going on Richie?" I pause, and unfold all my options in my head. Lying to Beverly Marsh, telling her big lies, is something I hate doing. Refusing to tell her anything is mean, and would never last too long because she knows how to break me down. I consider the weight of just telling her, and I quickly scan my surroundings; both of my parents have left for work now. I am alone.

"Do you remember Zachary Bowers?" I don't know why this is so on my mind, but it seems like an important place to start. And I haven't told Bill or Stan this detail, and Bev deserves to know me better.

"Yes, love, I remember him."

"We were friends for a while - I don't know if you remember, because that was when..."

"The clown." She says simply.

"Right." My heart is beating a million miles a minute. "We kissed." Silence. Slow breathing. "Zach kissed me- I kissed- we kissed, Bev. That summer."

"OK, sweetie." Her voice melts like chocolate.

"That was years ago, and I'm sorry I never told you."

"That's OK, Richie. I'm glad you're telling me now." She alleviates the weights on my chest with every word.

"I'm just telling you that because I need you to know where I'm coming from when I say what I'm about to say." I gulp. My voice is low, and I can feel a cold sweat coming in. I love Beverly Marsh more than words will ever describe. Telling her feels like an avalanche. "I'm in love with Eddie, Bev." There is a pause, but not a scary one. Its like I can hear her turning over the words in her head.

"Well - that makes a lot of sense, sweetie." I smile and exhale. "And I'm so proud of you. For telling people." I never could've doubted that Bev would be OK with this, because Beverly Marsh is wonderful. "Although, I am guessing that Bill kind of bamboozled you into spilling the beans." I laugh.

"Abso-fucking-lutely." And we're laughing together now.

"Richie, I really love you, so I want to be as honest as I can - is that OK?" I hum a 'yes'. "I don't know if Eddie's... if Eddie likes guys. I don't know that at all, and I couldn't even really guess. So, I'm not going to tell you to run with it or go with it or that its going to be this magical fairytale that comes true." She's right. And I love her for it. My heart hurts a bit anyway. "But I'm going to tell you this; all of us are always going to love you just the same. I know you, Richie. And I feel like your breakdown comes more from fear than love; fear of this meaning you're a new, different person, and fear that we won't like that person. Well we do, Richie, and we always will. Because we love you - OK?" I'm choked up now, so I nod, but then I realise that that's not how telephones work. And everything is unravelling in my head, and everything is on fire, and my face is burning up, and I say it;

"Bev - I - I think I'm gay."

"I think you're probably right, love." And I'm crying now. A lot. Because, of course, I am gay. The character I put on, who wants to have lots of sex and kiss lots of women, he's just a front, and he's so convincing that even I fell for it. But he's not real. I am real, and I have kissed two people in my life; two boys. It's the scariest feeling in the world, to realise that about yourself. In this moment, every bully who has ever called me a fag or a fairy or a queer has been right. I've been the thing I've been most scared of, this whole time. My inside writhe. I feel lightheaded.

"Bev." Sob, sob, sob. "I'm so scared." I can hardly contain myself, but I try so hard.

"I know you are Richie; I know." There's so much love in her voice I could swim in it. I want to drown. "But please remember what I just said; we all love you, and we always will. You're always gonna be the

same Richie to us." I know she means every word. But all the same, in my fit of panic, I hang up the phone. I don't go to school that day. I stay home. I'll regret that.

I don't know if I ought to have warned you about how dark my story was going to be. It's rough. Once I told Bev I was gay, it became this undeniable fact, but I guess it always has been. I guess that's why Bowers made me cry, and why I've only ever had serious feelings for boys, and why I've always felt this deep shame, as if I knew something was always wrong. *Wrong*. The word echoes in my head, and that's because it's how I feel. Wrong; wrong; wrong. I'm crying for hours. And I can't cure this deep sadness in my heart, that aches like a hangover and sickens me just the same. I become insatiable; I need to do *something*. To treat it.

I'm on my bathroom floor now, door locked, head fuzzy still. And I'm thinking about the Kissing Bridge. I'm thinking about the way I carved our initials, and perverted our whole friendship. I wonder if he ever saw it; if he ever knew. I think hard on it. The memory is so clear.

Sharp metal, drawing deep straight lines.

I breathe deeply, as the white noise in my head begins to screech into clarity.

I cut, and carve, and make fact of the fictions I've locked in my head for so long.

But I am not at the Kissing Bridge now. Because I am still on the bathroom floor. And everything fucking hurts.

13. Chapter 13

tw; self harm, suicide mention, blood

I fucked up. See, I can admit that in hindsight; once you're out of that headspace, and you look back at the stuff you did, you know you should've never done it in the first place. But in the moment it felt like I'd needed to; I needed the noise to stop. Doing things like that have the effect of slamming your hand on a table; they demand silence. Once I'd patted up the blood with tissues and flushed the reality away, I rolled my pant leg back down and lay there for a while. I wasn't even crying. I just laid there.

It's around lunchtime now. I haven't moved in maybe an hour, and the throbbing in my head and heart has settled to a quiet buzz that I can disregard as regular aches. I really hate this place I've wound up in. I want to peel off my skin and leave it, like a snake, and become some wholly new thing that nobody will recognise. And that's not cowardice; its realism. Bev will still love me; I believe that of her. But what about Eddie? What about Ben? And Stan and Bill are fine with it right now, but since I have to admit to them that I'm whole ass certified gay, who's to say if that'll be OK with them? Of course, there's always going to be a touch of irrationality in my head right now, but I believe it all the same. I want to run away; if I throw them away first, they can't drop me. This is the thought that circles like a vulture when I hear footsteps coming up the stairs. Which is fucking terrifying, by the way, since it's the middle of the day.

"Rich?" It's Eds. Because of course it is. "You home, Richie?" I lay in silence for a while. This is the first time I realise how dry my mouth is. I'm a corpse on this cold tiled floor. But not quite; I'm too chicken to kill myself, after all. I hear him quickly pace between all of the upstairs rooms, before settling outside the locked bathroom door. He knocks quietly. "Rich? You in there, Rich?"

"Yep." I say quietly, massaging my temples as the white noise returns.

"Hey Rich." The relief in his voice is louder than his words; I know now that he's been worried. "Bev called Bill in a panic before school, saying she was worried you were really upset about something. When

you didn't come in, we all got really worried. I figured I'd skip out at lunch and come check in." I let the silence sit. "Is that OK, Rich?"

"I'm fine, Eds." I barely have the emotional energy to form full sentences. I'm exhausted.

"Could you let me in, Rich? I'd really like to see you." I sigh; pause; think. After a while, I kick the latch of the door unlocked with a stretch, as I don't want to get up. He opens it slowly. "Thanks Rich." But it's then that I understand what he sees. I'm on the floor. And, sure, I cleaned up a little, but the razor is still discarded next to me. In between the tiles, in the thin lines, red has settled like alarm sirens. My pant leg is puffy from where I've stuffed tissues to stop the bleeding. And I know Eddie; I know he sees all of this. He lets out a little gasp and, without a word, gets the work. He's searching through my medicine cabinet, and pulls out band-aids, wipes and gauze. He's a little frantic, but he gets like this when things get medical, so it doesn't seem too strange. A moment later, he kneels next to me.

"Rich could I - could you roll up your pant leg?" He sniffles; I realise now he's choked up, and crying a little. "If that's OK?" I hesitate. This is a very scary and vulnerable thing, I realise. And a huge part of me doesn't want Eddie to see it; I don't want to put him through my tragic reality; I don't want him to fear for me like that. But I also love him, and trust him. And right now, I'm pretty sure I need him. I roll it up, and look away. "This might sting." He says. He doesn't know the half of it.

Rubbing the wipe over the wounds carefully, I can almost hear him wincing on my behalf. He presses the gauze down firm then, and after a little while the bleeding stops almost completely. He then wraps the gauze tight around the collection of thin lines a couple times over, and secures the bind with band-aids in the place of surgical tape that we don't have. I turn back to him once I sense it's over; his eyes are puffy and red, and he wipes his nose on his sleeve. I can't process the sight; I hug him quickly.

"Eds, I'm so fucking sorry." I whisper. He shakes his head as we part.

"Don't apologise, please, just -" He's breathing very carefully and calmly. "Tell me what's going on, Rich. Please. Let me in." And it hits

me just how hard I want to. I want Eddie Kaspbrak to know me so wholly, and so completely, and to understand everything. I want to be that close to him. I want him to see me in my unapologetic truth, and in a way he just did. And I've never felt so vulnerable, but I do feel seen. And perhaps that can't be bad. So, before I can think more, it kind of just happens;

"I'm gay, Eds." It hurts less when I say it this time. That might be because I'm so emotionally exhausted. It might be because pain is relative.

"OK." Everyone's response really is the same. "That's very OK. Super OK." He's adorable as he fumbles. I'm so relieved. "But why did you -" he gestures to my leg.

"I hate myself for it, Eds. I don't want to be this person, you know?" I exhale deeply, cleansing my insides. "It's terrifying. It's like there's some awful monster inside me, and it's changing me, and I'm so worried that people aren't going to like the me that comes out of it."

"OK." He's nodding now. "Can I hug you?" I nod back and he pulls me in so tight that I spurt out a harsh exhale. "I always love you, Richie, OK? Never feel scared about this stuff, not with me, OK?"

"OK." I smile quietly to myself.

"No, I mean it." He won't let go, so I lean into him further. "You're always *my* Rich, always, and I don't give a shit about any of this small stuff. You're my best friend, Rich, and you're never alone, OK?"

"OK!" I half-laugh, because he's so sweet. He skips school for the rest of the day, and we sit, and read, and watch movies, and he plays with my hair and makes me laugh and starts to heal the bits of me that feel the most damaged, after what might be classified as the most emotionally turbulent day of my life. And that's all that happens. We don't kiss, he doesn't confess his undying love, and I don't confess mine. Eddie Kaspbrak is my best friend, and that is the constant to all of this bullshit. The story rolls on.

im like q unhappy with how this chapter ended up but pls stick with me, I promise this fic is going somewhere good x